

## “Changing Masters”: Gender, Genre, and the Discourses of Slavery

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“He had never sold anyone before, and now he persuaded himself that what he was about to do was not selling in its actual sense.”<sup>1</sup> What is “selling in its actual sense”? A young African man about to exchange his seven-year-old sister for money measures his action against a fixed standard, and, moved by his own rhetorical argument, concludes that his (trans)action can be distinguished from “selling in its actual sense.” How he comes to that conclusion and its moral and political implications for the study of comparative literature are of paramount concern to me. Difference, it would seem, both acknowledges and dismisses a ground for comparison. Especially ironic because structured as a negative assertion—“he had never sold anyone . . . he was not selling”—the older brother’s exercise in critical self-deception is an exemplary moment in Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Slave Girl*, a text that both compels comparative analysis and challenges the terms of current comparatist practice. What does slavery mean? How do different cultural narratives about national, social, and individual identity, sameness and difference, frame our “sense” of slavery? And how does a feminist approach to issues of subjective agency and possibility, power, property, and propriety (“le sens propre du terme”) change the character of such an inquiry?

Slavery as an institution has persisted, indeed flourished, since ancient times across continents and empires, exceeding even those boundaries during the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries when an international slave trade made human bondage virtually a universal practice. In turn, the discourse on slavery has itself become a kind of master narrative in which reductive and restrictive categories co-opt as well as overtly

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<sup>1</sup>Buchi Emecheta, *The Slave Girl* (New York: Braziller, 1977), 37; hereafter cited by page in the text.

exploit all manner of difference. Masculinist and nationalist models of slavery have dominated American critical discourse. In order to decenter these assumptions, especially as they focus on the African American slave narrative, in this essay I take up the issues of gender, race, and imperialism in a modern African novel about slavery. By reading and rereading race, gender, and genre intertextually in *The Slave Girl*, we may engage directly with the features of multiculturalism, spatial plurality, alter/nativity, hybridity, syncretism—all aspects of an inherently comparative methodology—and resist reflexively the tendency toward another universalist, internationalist, or patriarchal metropolitan paradigm.

Slavery as idea has been distinguished from slavery as social system. Comparative historians and theorists recognize a continuity between older and more modern forms of slavery while differentiating between abstract legal status and an actual set of institutions involving economic functions and interpersonal relationships. Although the ambiguous status of the slave as both property and person had been interrogated from Aristotle to Locke, it was in the eighteenth-century debates over natural law that slavery assumed a central position for American and European moral philosophers, theologians, and political theorists such as Montesquieu and Jefferson. This Enlightenment argument, often cast in terms of the conflict between the right to freedom and the will to dominate, tested the limits of humanist logic and moral codes. In "progressist" theories of racial inferiority, the near-conflation of "natural" and "law" conceived of one standard for the laws of nature and another for the laws of nations. It became strangely possible to condemn slavery in the realm of moral abstraction but continue to justify it as politically inevitable or economically necessary in the real world. In the nineteenth century the great slave controversy between abolitionists and advocates pivoted on whether American slavery, based on the total subjugation of one race by another, was essentially different from historical varieties of bondage and serfdom. Even in the late twentieth century, literary critics have been wrestling with the discourse of American slavery as much as with the institution itself, if indeed they are separable.

The debate has centered partly on the discursive construction of slavery as a key to national identity. For Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad "slavery is perhaps the central intellectual challenge, other than the Constitution itself, to those who would understand the meaning of America."<sup>2</sup> As David Brion Davis has brilliantly shown, an un-

<sup>2</sup>Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), viii.

reconcilable moral contradiction underlies America's mission and meaning: America—the idealized projection of European hopes for a new beginning—flourished not by liberating itself from previous structures and practices but rather by extending and perfecting the institution of slavery. The transatlantic slave trade, which was an essential aspect of colonization and an integral part of the early economic and social development of the nation, began with Columbus.

Implicitly missing in all the earlier debates was the perspective of the enslaved subject, for, as Davis puts it, until modern times “few slaves recorded their thoughts and . . . scholars did not think the subject worthy of study.”<sup>3</sup> Yet this voice is not difficult to locate: one need but turn to slave narratives, the body of literature written or dictated by ex-slaves of African descent who were transported to the New World in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., defines slave narratives as “only those written works published before 1865, after which time *de jure* slavery ceased to exist,” and asserts that by the same token, “the slave narrative proper could no longer exist after slavery was abolished.” He acknowledges that using the “absolute abolition of slavery as the cut-off point for this genre” might be construed as arbitrary. But the rich generative potential of the slave narrative, its formative influence on narrative structures and strategies of subsequent African American literature, makes it possible to argue that “after 1865 the generic expectations of these autobiographies altered drastically.”<sup>4</sup>

That alteration parallels a striking rhetorical shift in slave narratives, from the antebellum comparison of slavery to a tomb to the postbellum comparison to a school of life. Linking this change in representational strategy to the development of Afro-American literary realism, William Andrews characterizes these different portrayals of the experience of having endured and survived slavery as “existential” (antebellum) as opposed to “pragmatic” (postbellum). Elsewhere Andrews contends that the valorization of the romantic, rebellious antebellum fugitive slave narrator has skewed our notions of the history of the genre, prescriptively limiting for ideological reasons a necessarily dynamic signifying process. Contrary to orthodox critical opinion, which has fixated on one model, Andrews argues that “the image of slavery, along with the metaphor of black selfhood, undergoes revision as the nineteenth century evolves.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 30; hereafter cited by page in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxii.

<sup>5</sup>William L. Andrews, “The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American

Beyond the debate over nineteenth-century texts, slave narratives are widely regarded as the pretext and/or master paradigm for all African American autobiography and fiction. These first-person accounts of human bondage are necessarily generic hybrids, ingeniously combining elements of autobiographical, fictional, and historical discourse; as reflexive and symbolic performances, they enact modes and forge models of black selfhood and identity in the most challenging of contexts. Testimonials to the transplantation, brutalization, and enslavement of black people by those who endured and survived—and who, not incidentally, also managed to gain access to the crucial networks of publication—they are predicated on the capacity of an individual narrator to represent, to stand for and stand *in* for, those whose voices have been silenced but whose stories are interwoven with the narratives of others.

Thus as foundational American texts whose borders have been variously contested, slave narratives are complexly figurative cultural documents which reveal the discursive complexity of slavery as a rhetorical construct—at particular moments in American history. In putting the word "slavery" in quotation marks, Hortense Spillers offers a provocative reminder that (even) the notion of slavery belongs to a discursive field and thus is not exempt from the play of radical textuality:

It seems to me that every generation of systematic readers is compelled to "reinvent" slavery in its elaborate and peculiar institutional ways and means. . . . In a very real sense, a full century or so "after the fact," "slavery" is *primarily* discursive, as we search vainly for a point of absolute and indisputable origin, for a moment of plenitude that would restore us to the real, rich "thing" itself before discourse touched it. In that regard, "slavery" becomes the great "test case" around which, for its Afro-American readers, the circle of mystery is recircumscribed time and again. . . . It becomes increasingly clear that the cultural synthesis we call "slavery" was never homogeneous in its practices and conception, not unitary in the faces it has yielded. . . . To rob the subject of its dynamic character, to captivate it in a fictionalized scheme whose outcome is already inscribed by a higher, different, *other*, pöwer, freezes it in the ahistorical.<sup>6</sup>

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Realism," in McDowell and Rampersad, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, esp. 62–67; and Andrews, "Toward a Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 85.

<sup>6</sup>Hortense Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," in McDowell and Rampersad, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, 28–29.

The dynamic literary legacy of slavery contains multiple historical and cultural discourses. Tendencies toward reifying the "cultural synthesis we call 'slavery'" are being contested and challenged today, not only by scholars but by an increasing flow of novels about slavery as well.<sup>7</sup> As this generation of readers and writers across national and linguistic borders "reinvents" slavery to serve the crucial and changing needs of current racial identity politics, critics and scholars must reinvent and enlarge our comparative critical frameworks to engage the issues they raise.

These successive textualizations remind us that we cannot witness slavery through a unitary prism—historical, national, cultural, ideological, racial, or sexual. The danger of doing so is glaringly apparent in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, David Brion Davis's classical account of the historical problems of defining slavery in the West. As he puts it, certain "nagging contradictions . . . originate in the simple fact that the slave is a *man*" (31). This distinction clearly belongs to the realm of metaphysics, for the sphere of operation is commodification; a "man" means *not* an animal or a thing, a generic rather than a gendered human being.

In the lines that follow, however, "man" has more specific gendered connotations, and the slippage between the universal and the gendered meaning of the terms is crucial: "In general it has been said that the slave has three defining characteristics: his person is the property of another man, his will is subject to his owner's authority, and his labor or services are obtained through coercion. Since this description could sometimes be applied to wives and children in a patriarchal family, various writers have added that slavery must be 'beyond the limits of family relations'" (31–32). Davis's formulation writes off one form of enslavement against another, privileges one version or experience over another. A reader sensitive to a more diffused collection of "nagging contradictions" notices that effacing gender as a category of analysis here has enormous long-range implications. A logical sleight of hand makes it possible to acknowledge that the practice of slavery crosses structural boundaries and intersects with other forms of patriarchal domination, and simultaneously to dismiss the real and theoretical consequences of that realization. It has obviously been easier to preserve

<sup>7</sup>Contemporary American novels about slavery, some of which use the slave narrative model, include Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest Gaines's *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (1971), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1984), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) is dominated by the memory of slavery.

the abstract universalist pretensions of the concept of slavery as extra-familial, nondomestic (i.e., male) oppression than to question the epistemological (in this case Eurocentric *and* sexist) bias underlying the notion of what constitutes "family relations" in a particular society (Oh, that's not enslavement, that's family!). As I have suggested, the cultural "text" of slavery, despite the rich and textured exchange that surrounds it, remains a point of convergence for exclusionary, insular, and I would say arbitrary readings. What follows is an attempt to diffuse, diversify, and displace such readings by examining a narrative that presumes neither a masculine nor an American perspective.

The frame of reference implicit in most criticism of slave narratives shifts dramatically when the context is African slavery in the early years of the twentieth century and the text is *The Slave Girl* (1977), by the Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta.<sup>8</sup> What does such a gesture produce? It suggests that the intertextual relations of the slave narrative novel are not only linguistic and national, as Gates suggests ("a sub-genre of American, English, French, and Spanish fiction")<sup>9</sup> but diasporic; these relations by necessity encompass colonial and postcolonial Caribbean and Latin American writing as well. An anglophone, postcolonial, "third world" text, *The Slave Girl* problematizes the relations between nation and race, gender and genre, which figure so strongly in African American slave narratives, including those by women: it questions the possibility of any totalizable discourse on slavery. To treat Emecheta's novel as a slave narrative involves displacing generic issues about authenticity, credibility, and truth as they are figured in the authorial "I," issues that until recently, and for understandable reasons, have plagued American studies of narratives by ex-slaves.<sup>10</sup> Beginning with the prem-

<sup>8</sup>*The Slave Girl* is situated between two other novels by Emecheta in which slavery is intrinsically related to the status of women as wives and mothers: *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

<sup>9</sup>Gates, *Slave's Narrative*, xxii.

<sup>10</sup>Credibility is an issue not only in slave narrators' textual strategies but also in the work of earlier scholars and critics who strove to make credible and valuable by white cultural criteria the full range of black expression. On the problem of authenticity, see Jean Fagin Yellin, who changed the terrain when she documented the authenticity of Harriet Jacobs's celebrated *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) and situated its central importance in the slave narrative tradition. See also Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 45–61. On the obsession with authority and authorship in the slave narrative, see Francis Smith Foster, "Harriet Jacob's *Incidents* and the 'Careless Daughters' (And Sons) Who Read It," in *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 92–107. On the vexing relationship between subjective agency and critical reception in the female slave narrative, see Valerie Smith, "Loopholes

ise that all slave narratives are narratives of liberation, I focus on thematic, tropic, and structural affinities between nineteenth-century slave narratives and this modern novel about slavery, but I argue that these similarities must be read differently because of the novel's specific colonial context.

For Emecheta, slavery—as a fundamental feature of the African social and political economy—is inextricably tied to sexual oppression, a specific and traditional form of oppression that was reinforced and extended through the more generalized subjugation of African peoples by Europeans, but the terms of which must be relativized, localized, and historicized. Unlike slaves in the Occidental export trade, which valued men for their productive capacities, the great majority of slaves within the internal African market were women and children; women were in higher demand and generally more highly valued, less because of their reproductive capacities than because they have always performed a large amount of productive labor in African society. Of course, the importance of women's roles within the system did not preclude devaluation of gender and marginality of status. Women's submissive socialization and the "outsiderness" that always characterizes the slave point to the crucial and diverse function of women in real as well as symbolic slave economies. My purpose here is not to compare slavery in the Americas with the complex variety of African slavery; to do so would only implicitly reinforce the idea that African slavery was a particularly "benign" (read: deviant) version, since it did not correspond to the Western model. Instead, one concern here is the uses to which the various discourses on slavery can be put. Not surprisingly, the Eurocentric stereotypes and images of slavery (and freedom) until recently provided for Western anthropologists and historians (even literary critics) the norm against which non-Western institutions and practices were identified, named, and measured.<sup>11</sup>

A postcolonial novel about indigenous slavery by an African woman

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of Retreat: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1990), 212–26, and especially Carla Kaplan, "Narrative Contracts and Emancipatory Readers: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6.1 (1993): 93–119.

<sup>11</sup>See Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 3–84; also Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). As Claire Robertson and Martin Klein state in their groundbreaking study of women as central figures in African slavery, "Many accounts of African slavery are written as though the slaves were exclusively men." See Claire Robertson and Martin Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," in *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 3–25.

disrupts Western contemporary discourse on slavery precisely because Emecheta's enslaved heroine would seem to fulfill the requirements of what Cynthia Ward calls "a unified representation of the perfectly *other* 'Other'—black, female, colonized." Yet how this "authentic" African female subject is "othered" depends, as always, on who is doing the "othering." Emecheta criticism "available in the United States," according to Ward, interprets her novels as "feminist parables" while "appropriating the 'African woman's experience' as part of a universal liberatory discourse" without "regard for issues that concern African literary critics." By contrast, "'African' readings of Emecheta seek to situate her work within the African literary canon . . . rejecting the imposition of neocolonial—European and North American—values and imperatives, including feminism" (that is, critical of individualist-inflected imperial feminism).<sup>12</sup> Such divergent attempts to press Emecheta's writing into one kind of essentialist service or another make clear that her representation of African women is neither unequivocal nor reducible to an either-or model.

Must we dichotomize the problem of subject construction in *The Slave Girl*, and might there exist ways that move beyond Africanist/feminist or African/female? Although there seems to be no way at present to constitute a politics of subjectivity and representation in which race and gender do not function as the dominant, competing, or interchangeable terms, *The Slave Girl* invites us to question whether it is advantageous or desirable to occult all other conceptual possibilities or theoretical configurations in favor of this interpretive model. It invites us to continue to trace the effects of "the politics of theory" in our reading and question our perceptual frameworks, our critical presuppositions and categories, especially as we begin to take them too much for granted. This means subverting the canon beyond merely enlarging, extending, or exchanging the set of culturally valorized and authorized texts to include a previously ignored or repressed set. For to counter the idea of "canonicity" itself is to question categorically the category and change the conditions of reading for all texts, to read differently, alongside, against, to contextualize and recontextualize.

Assuming the double critical identity on which the present volume rests, the feminist necessarily brings a perspective that challenges the field of comparative literature to contest its own disciplinary boundaries, seen as social, aesthetic, political, and linguistic. Certainly a 1988 collection of essays whose stated purpose is to "exemplify" what com-

<sup>12</sup>Cynthia Ward, "What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of Otherhood," *PMLA* 105.1 (1990): 84–85.



paratists actually do" indicates that feminist theory has made some incursions into current comparative practice, if often outside traditional institutional boundaries. The editors, Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes, attest that comparatists "have had to learn to participate in an international community of theoretical exchange," and they acknowledge that comparative literature faces unstable categories and shifting frameworks. They find it "seems to be less a set of practices (e.g., comparing texts in different languages, comparing literary and 'nonliterary' texts, comparing literature and the other arts) and more a shared perspective that sees literary activity as involved in a complex web of cultural relations."<sup>13</sup>

This description, however, does not suffice to delineate the new perspective, for "cultural relations" covers an amorphous range of literary encounters and engagements. It does describe the contents of the volume, which displaces the classic Eurocentric focus on "historical and international contexts" of comparative practice toward the East-West axis: one essay addresses the theoretical implications of "emergent literature"; another laments the arbitrariness of the "comparatist's canon."<sup>14</sup> Precisely because the practitioners of comparative literature are by definition multilingual and their approach multicultural, heterocritical, and interdisciplinary—and because theory itself has become the arena in literary studies of greatest self-conscious politicization—the field of comparative literature might be said to encompass cultural criticism. Or perhaps, one could argue, it is even an emergent form of cultural criticism, like the literature comparatists are compelled more and more to address.

A feminist comparatist critique engages the very status of multicultural literacy as well as the gendered, multicultural, and/or multiracial subject of writing, a critique that bypasses previous comparatist formulations and definitions. Where feminist and cultural critical analysis intersect, difference reemerges. When subjectivity is understood to be

<sup>13</sup>Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes, eds., *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>14</sup>Wlad Godzich's elegant and provocative analysis of the precarious and tense relationship between "the production of existing knowledge and the production of new knowledge," reveals comparative literature to be a discipline "at risk." Over and against the "petrified . . . hegemonic, and monumentalizing view of . . . national, international, and comparative literature," he celebrates the multifarious and disunifying writings of "newly constituted subjects" in a "field" reconceptualized as "the enabling condition of cultural elaboration" ("Emergent Literature and the Field of Comparative Literature," in Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective*, 18–36). By contrast, in Frank Warnke's essay, "The Comparatist's Canon: Some Observations," his marked concern for "the neglect of Dutch letters" is counterbalanced by his contempt for literature about Colette's "characteristic subject matter and her own myth-image as the sexy Frenchwoman" (50).

less a matter of construction per se than of position, how to avoid privileging, subsuming, eliding, or conflating the categories of race and gender becomes a paramount concern. Both sides are quick to recognize transgressive models or insidious encoding in the discourse of the other, especially when there is already inscribed in the profile of "feminist" a white or Eurocentric bias and in the profile of "cultural critic" a masculinist bias.

In a 1990 essay on African women's writing and African feminist criticism, Susan Andrade discusses what appears to be an irreconcilable difference between the two, manifested in the tendency to read the "valorized category allegorically" so as to "displace and replace gender or race":

For Eurocentric feminists, race is merely a trope for gender, another way to understand the larger oppression of women. For masculinist cultural critics, the privileged category of race subsumes all others; gender serves as a lens through which the greater oppression of Non-Europeans can be understood. Neither of the above theoretical positions offers a space from which an African feminist criticism can be articulated, for neither is able to address the heterogeneity that analysis of African women's texts must foreground: to respect the cultural heterogeneity of Africa as well as that of African women.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, lessons should be taken from Emecheta's own practice, which "offers a space" for feminist comparatist theorizing; her text is no less "African" because it focuses on those local traditional social structures that continue to frame the contemporary politics of female identity.

Beginning with the prologue's function, the panoramic unfolding of an oral and physical landscape, the narrator of *The Slave Girl* insists rather didactically (as if assuming an audience unfamiliar with the territory) on specificity—of place, history, subject, and the forces that connect them. Although Emecheta certainly does not mitigate the devastating effects of foreign intrusion into native traditions or the horrors of colonial domination, she offers an ironic warning to those who choose to forget that "slavery begins at home." The double entendre of the word "home" figures powerfully in a narrative set against the backdrop of colonial rule, in which an African child is sold into slavery by her older brother in her own land after the premature death of her parents. The novel's title, resonant with the titles of the many African American slave narratives that precede it, suggests the divestment of

<sup>15</sup>Susan Z. Andrade, "Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion: Naming an African Women's Literary Tradition," *Research in African Literatures* 21.1 (1990): 94.

individual identity by the overarching category of "slave girl"; but the far-reaching implications of the protagonist's enslaved condition are not grasped by the reader until the final paragraph, when Emecheta's narrator directs her attack on the patriarchal institution of marriage and the status of women in African society.

Emecheta's novel portrays a "naive" Igbo tribal life in Ibuza at the dawn of the twentieth century, sometime after the abolition of the Euro-American slave trade. The narrator maintains a consistently ironic tone; her epic perspective situates the narrative at the privileged point of intersection of history and myth, both temporally and spatially inside and outside the system:

The people of Ibuza—at a time when it was glorious to be an Englishman, when the reign of the great Queen Victoria's son was coming to its close, when the red of the British Empire covered almost half the map of the world, when colonisation was at its height, and Nigeria was being taken over by Great Britain—did not know that they were not still being ruled by the Portuguese. The people of Ibuza did not realize that their country, to the last village, was being amalgamated and partitioned by the British. They knew nothing of what was happening; they did not know that there were other ways of robbing people of their birthright than by war. The African of those days was very trusting. (15)

This is a classic description of what Abdul JanMohamed has delineated as the "dominant" phase, as distinguished from the "hegemonic" phase, of colonialism: the dominant phase "spans the period from the earliest European conquest to the moment at which a colony is granted 'independence.' . . . During this phase the 'consent' of the natives is primarily passive and indirect." It is precisely the "colonizer's ability to exploit preexisting power relations of hierarchy, subordination, and subjugation" within the indigenous society that makes his domination over the native so insidious. As economic and social practices, slave trafficking and female subjugation were superimposed on African structures that were already in place. By contrast, JanMohamed argues, "in the hegemonic phase (or neocolonialism) the natives accept a version of the colonizers' entire system of values, attitudes, institutions, and modes of production. . . . The natives' internalization of Western cultures begins before the end of the dominant phase." Emecheta provides many examples of the "contradictions between the covert and the overt aspects of colonialism."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature, in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 80–81.

Ojebeta, the first daughter in her family to have survived beyond the first few minutes of life, is born into this political context. Although girls were not "normally particularly prized creatures," Ojebeta is especially cherished by her parents, her singularity a sign of her preciousness. To ensure that "she remains in the land of the living," her father takes an extensive journey to Idu, the mythological name for the old Benin empire, "said to be situated at that point where the blue sky touched the earth, [where] the people of Idu were the last humans you would see before you came to the end of the world" (20). He returns with special charms and rattles designed for the baby girl to wear to frighten away her friends from the land of the dead who will want to spirit her back to the other world.<sup>17</sup> At a time when, as the narrator says, "there was little division between myth and reality," between the microcosmic world of the village and the mysterious realms which extend beyond it, Ojebeta's father's arduous but successful journey takes on fatally symbolic overtones. While the mystical powers of the charms suggest that Ojebeta's life is symbolically overdetermined, their range of influence is limited; they will not be able to protect her from the threats of the material world. The degree to which she is loved by her father represents the monetary value placed on her by her brother in the absence of protective parents.

The 1918 influenza epidemic, at first ascribed to "natural" causes, kills both parents as well as many others in the village. The narrator soon makes it clear, however, that "Felenza" is "white man's death": "They shoot it into the air, and we breathe it in and die" (25). Moving in and out of this self-contained conceptual world into the larger geopolitical sphere of events, the narrator attempts to make sense of this strange and violent incursion. Finally, she provides a concrete but no more assimilable account of chemical warfare waged by the superpowers of World War I:

Most people living in the interior of Nigeria did not know that the whole country now belonged to the British who were ruling them indirectly through the local chiefs and elders. Now, in the year of 1916, the rumors said that the new colonial masters were at war with their neighbours the

<sup>17</sup>Florence Stratton argues that Emecheta's identification of Ojebeta as an *ogbanje*, the Igbo term for spirit child—"believed to be destined to die and be reborn repeatedly to the same mother unless a means can be found to break the cycle"—signifies ambiguous status on two levels. The myth functions as a way to explain infant mortality in many West African societies, and it emblemizes the limitations of female destiny. See Florence Stratton, "The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction," *Research in African Literatures*, Special Issue on Women's Writing, ed. Rhonda Cobham and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 19.2 (1988): 148.

"Germanis"; and the latter fought the British by blowing poisonous gas into the air. . . . Many inside Ibuza were asking themselves what they had to do with the Germanis, and the Germanis with them. There was no one to answer their questions. (27)

When Ojebeta's father is stricken, her mother is "confined to her hut like a prisoner until her months of mourning were over" (29); although exempt from death herself, the child is surrounded by it. Indeed, in the scene in which her mother has died in the night, she literally sleeps in death's arms. Snuggling close to her mother's breast in the early morning hours, seeking "warmth, reassurance, and protection" (28), Ojebeta lies unaware that the maternal space is now occupied only in spirit.

While taking care not to attribute the child's subsequent enslavement to any one cause, the narrator does establish a connection between the devaluation of subjectivity within colonialism's complex and extensive representational network and the domestic devaluation of females within the patriarchal family and African society generally. If not for the attention paid to historical context and concrete detail, this narrative might begin to resemble a folk or fairy tale in which just the right confluence of circumstances creates a vacuum that only evil can fill. In Emecheta's hands the slave narrative trope of the journey is refigured and ultimately subverted, used, as it were, for different ends; it also prefigures Ojebeta's passage from childhood to womanhood. For Florence Stratton, who reads *The Slave Girl* as a female bildungsroman, an archetypal story of entrapment, the sexual suggestiveness of this particular journey marks a crucial inversion of human development. Tragically, the contours of Ojebeta's life will shrink as she moves "from autonomy and self-assertion to dependency and abnegation, from the freedom and fullness of girlhood into the slavery and self-denial of womanhood."<sup>18</sup> Whereas her father's arduous quest involves risking his life to save Ojebeta, her brother Okolie at his first opportunity sacrifices her for his own gain. At seven years of age, Ojebeta is deceived into believing that she and her brother are taking a day trip to Onitsha, one of Africa's central markets, to visit a relative who was married out of her tribe. Instead, after hiking for miles "through various kinds of forests, wading streams, and being ferried in a canoe" (46), they reach crowds of gaily covered stalls. In a painfully protracted scene in which the "small, helpless, and terrified child" serves as a commodity in the human bazaar—sold for the few pounds her brother needs for his coming-of-age celebration—Emecheta plays the pathos of the child's situation against the brother's despicable weakness.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 148–50.

Throughout the transaction Okolie is coolly observed through the eyes of the cosmopolitan female merchant, who understands the "true" value of things and people. Depicted as a greedy and foolish village farmer whose social pretensions and crude manners merit ridicule, Okolie provides an afternoon's entertainment for all. The implication that his personality defects transcend the limitations of his rural background and are not circumstantial but essential is later borne out when neither his marriage nor his business dealings proves fruitful. It seems important that his moral failure be contrasted with the strength of Ojebeta's character and intelligence, so that even as a slave she surpasses him. The irony has a double twist, however, because although Okolie never achieves anything, his failures could be realized only at Ojebeta's expense, so to speak; in the end, gender overwrites subjective possibility anyway. When Ojebeta's charms are cut off, signifying to her and the outside world that she has lost her connection to her dead parents and her previous identity, the reader knows that her brother's betrayal of her is complete. His characterization as a pathetic but not malicious human being is crucially tied to Emecheta's general portrayal of colonized men as self-centered, vain, and childish, sometimes even well-intentioned, but crucially susceptible to delusions of power and the lures of immediate gratification, be they sensual or material. Ultimately, men are weak people, propped up by a system that reinforces their self-delusions. Only Ojebeta's father is exempt from such categorical derision.

Using the technique of free and indirect speech ("He had never sold anyone before and now he persuaded himself that what he was about to do was not selling in its actual sense"[37]), the narrator outlines the differences between the buying and selling of human beings for foreign white markets and an internal commercial system which depended on thriving labor and a class system based on acquired wealth, but not without reminding the reader of the links between them. Hours after Okolie sells his sister into slavery, his attitude and bearing recall "those days when it was easy for the European to urge the chief of a powerful village to wage war on a weaker one in order to obtain slaves for the New World" (73). Domestic slavery is justified by one wealthy female trader as a social service as well as an economic necessity: "Where would we be without slave labour, and where would some of these unwanted children be without us?" The narrator's response is short, the tone sharp: "It might be evil, but it was a necessary evil" (64). Hence the reader is apprised that it was within the brother's power and right to sell his younger sister into slavery, that it was neither illegal nor culturally unsanctioned, but that the act was to be understood, none-

theless, as an emotional betrayal or a familial transgression. Indeed, it appears that when certain kinds of kinship relations are overdetermined, kinlessness and exploitation go hand in hand; Emecheta indicates that it is precisely the slippage between kinship and abuse that enabled indigenous slavery to exist.

For Ojebeta the transition from security to slavery, though in no way comparable to the horrific descriptions of the Middle Passage in African American slave narratives, is psychologically wrenching. Unlike African American narratives in which slavery fuels a rural agricultural economy and emancipation means escaping the terrors of the southern plantation for the perils of the northern city, here an immediate opposition is established between the poor tribal ways to which Ojebeta is accustomed and the busy, sophisticated urban life to which she must adapt. As a slave, Ojebeta sleeps in special quarters and works with other slave girls as a seamstress. Her wealthy black mistress is represented as cunning and complicitous with the powers that be and have been; formerly the concubine of a Portuguese man, she owns one of the largest textile stalls at the Onitsha market which serves as the commercial center for the entire region. She traffics in human labor, but is portrayed as a kind of benign despot: she cares about her slaves. The cruelties of slavery are not mitigated in this portrait of an African slave girl's existence, but slavery has a human face—that of the harsh but caring surrogate mother, Ma Palagada, who strives to create a version of an extended family, supported somewhat by her husband, Pa Palagada.

Emecheta's detailed and carefully drawn depiction of slavery discloses its structural and functional aspects, but she seems concerned ultimately with the ways in which women have internalized their sexual subjugation. She represents slavery not only as a signifier of social status or position, or even a particular historical destiny, but as a psychic condition, a way of being. Thus, there are no rhetorical indications here that the narrator knows more than she chooses to tell, that she is protecting the reader from worse, or that she is negotiating the limits or boundaries of the representable, as is often the case in African American slave narratives, most notably in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It is surely a fundamental aspect of Emecheta's agenda in this third-person narration to show that there is no gap between the slave's lack of subjective agency and her capacity to express it. Under this system the limitations of female experience and slave consciousness are synonomous.

Ojebeta's initial sense of estrangement gives way to a sense of belonging to a community: the sororal relations she enjoys with the other

slave girls help to compensate for the childhood she has lost. During her years of servitude, Ojebeta is exposed to the "civilizing" effects of education, etiquette, and Christianity. In contrast to the paradigmatic scene of instruction in African American slave narratives, in which the slave is both symbolically and actually empowered by her ascent to literacy, in *The Slave Girl* not only is literacy not seen as dangerous knowledge, but its effects benefit all the participants in the system. The fact that Ma Palagada's slaves know how to read permits her to charge more for the dresses the girls make; her profit and prestige increase. Not only do her slave seamstresses copy the fashions of white European women for the wealthy women in the region, but on Sundays they themselves wear silk to church for all to see. The irony is that instead of providing the slave girl with the means to conceptualize her own freedom, education here signals socialization into a colonially inflected cultural system of values.

By highlighting the development of her slave heroine's social and intellectual abilities, Emecheta introduces new variants into what seemed to be a closed system, including the relative exercise of choice in a world where none would have seemed possible. When Ma Palagada dies, chaos ensues, and Ojebeta has the chance to run away home to her people.<sup>19</sup> Ojebeta suffers the death of her mistress "as if she had been her real mother," weighs alternatives, and decides that "she would rather go back to Ibuza and eat the mushrooms of freedom than stay in this house, and eat meat in slavery" (146-47). Deviating sharply from African American slave narratives and defying the expectations of readers familiar with them, the escape itself is described in a few lines, and no special significance is accorded this symbolic passage beyond the expected emotional stress Ojebeta experiences.

Ojebeta is welcomed warmly when she returns to her village, and is celebrated for the polish and sophistication she has acquired; she carries herself differently from Ibuza women and speaks like a girl born in Onitsha, "with rounded 'Rs' and a slowness of delivery, each word drawn out" (107). Others refer to her nine years of slavery as if she had spent them at finishing school—an attitude that recalls William Andrews's characterization of the accommodation strategies of the African American postbellum slave narrator. Although her brother is criticized

<sup>19</sup>Andrade, "Rewriting History," reads the central drama of Ma Palagada's mysterious "sudden illness" and subsequent death, in which the 1929 Igbo Women's War is marginally inscribed, as an example of Emecheta's "dialogizing of oppositional behavior." This strategy provides a historical context for interpreting women's complicity and resistance or rebellion in which the latter is represented so marginally as to be constructed as "un-inscribable" (108).



severely for his greedy act by the people of her village, in their perception a malevolent cause has resulted ultimately in a positive effect. But as Ojebeta's practices and beliefs begin to diverge sharply from those of the community, she feels a strange ambivalence: great affection slightly undermined by a sense of her own cultural superiority. As Emecheta notes: "So afraid was Ojebeta that all she had learned at Ma Palagada's would be wasted that she prayed to God to send her an Ibuza man who had experience of the white man's work and would know the value of what she had learned" (154). Now enthusiastically involved in the Church of England, she finds a group of friends who deem it stylish to take European names; soon Ogbanje Ojebeta becomes Ogbanje Alice, an ironic invocation of the act of renaming so central to African American slave narratives. Ogbanje Alice is too naive to understand how deeply susceptible she is to competing and contradictory ideologies of power.

The narrative moves rather abruptly to its next stage. When Ojebeta (now Ogbanje Alice) meets Jacob—a gentle, educated man who lives and works in Lagos (that is to say, he does white man's work) and has returned to his village to look for a girl to marry—the reader knows a match is imminent. In order for them to marry, however, Ojebeta's two older brothers (who also live and work in Lagos) must give their permission. More crucially, they must determine Ojebeta's bride price. After some negotiations, the marriage takes place, and the couple's conjugal life begins happily enough. The narrator's well-placed comments about "the eternal bond between husband and wife being produced by centuries of traditions, taboos, and latterly Christian dogma" (173), however, cause the reader to suspect that this is not a marriage of equals, in spite of their mutual intelligence and cultivation. And Ojebeta has other problems, one outstanding: she begins to "lose her babies," her miscarriages a sign from the spirits that she has not escaped the destiny of an unredeemed slave. She must be bought back from Clifford, Ma Palagada's son, who after the death of his mother became Ojebeta's legal owner.

In the penultimate scene, where Jacob pays Clifford eight pounds—the exact sum paid for the child Ojebeta twenty-eight years earlier—Emecheta moves sharply between the characters' thoughts and the words they actually say to one another. Handsome, uniformed Clifford (serving in the British army in the big war in Europe) is astonished by the sight of Ojebeta, now "the ghost of the girl he had known so many years ago." No longer the energetic, laughing girl with the straight carriage and jet black skin, she looks thinner and incomparably older than he could ever have imagined. "Momentarily he wondered what

had happened to change her so much?" (176). The implicit response is that she had been eating "the mushroom of freedom." She passes these same moments engaged in self-justification: looking around at her one-room home and her untidy, well-intentioned husband with the red eyes, she confirms that "she would rather have this than be a slave in a big house in Onitsha." After an exchange of superficial niceties, Jacob sends Ojebeta back to the kitchen to finish her cooking so that the men can "finalize the arrangements for her permanent ownership" (177). The transaction completed, Ojebeta's two brothers, husband, and former owner sit down to a meal of steaming rice and hot chicken stew. Since Ojebeta's own position seems to preclude the possibility of self-irony, Emecheta leaves the final commentary on slavery to the narrator: "So as Britain was emerging from war once more victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery which she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters" (179).

These scathing words indissolubly inscribe Ojebeta's status as a female subject into the larger colonialist narrative, but a narrative in which the structure of patriarchy subsumes all others. Using both the fictional conventions of slave narratives and the autobiographical interventions of slave novels, this postcolonial African author, whose mother's name was Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta, reads the politics of domination from the position of the (daughter of the) twice-mastered native woman. Ojebeta figures metonymically in this narrative *as* the colonized nation whose status and destiny are ultimately determined by the precolonial meanings attributed to class and gender differences rather than by any specific colonialist configuration of exploitation or opening up of those differences.<sup>20</sup> When Ojebeta is enslaved, her special charms are cut off, breaking the links to her past identity and enabling her master to constitute a new one for her: slave girl. When Ojebeta becomes a married woman, the sign that she is still a slave and not quite a wife—the link to her previous identity—is her childlessness. Her debased status is therefore unrelated to her actual enslavement, only to the unfulfilled terms of its contract. Once the exchange value of her body as the site of both productive and reproductive labor is

<sup>20</sup>In "Cracking the Code: Strategies in African Women's Writing" (unpublished manuscript, 1990), Chikwenye Ogunyemi identifies such a figurative strategy in many postcolonial texts by African women: "The continuing independence struggles underscored the need to obtain genuine freedom for all including the nations, who, like women, were still subjugated. The writers see woman's destiny and the motherland's as intertwined, a crucial point realized in some texts allegorically and symbolically" (1). I am grateful for her helpful suggestions on this essay.

recontextualized, though never questioned, she can assume her social identity as wife, properly understood. So much, says Emecheta's narrative, for liberation.

*The Slave Girl's* acerbic ending provides yet another twist on the oft-cited line from the conclusion of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage." For as Jacobs apologizes for not having met the traditional requirements of the domestic novel by achieving "only" freedom and not romance (i.e., marriage), she subverts her readers' expectations of how the plots of both domestic fiction and slave narratives are resolved. By recalling Jacobs's claim for understanding that different conditions produce different conventions, Emecheta makes her point all the more painful to consider. What if the story ends with marriage but not with freedom? What might link the destinies of a nineteenth-century romantic heroine ("Reader, I married him") and Ojebeta, the twentieth-century slave girl? Reading *The Slave Girl* from the position of the comparatist-feminist means assuming from the outset an extensive play of textual relations and intersections: between African and New World women's writing, between nineteenth- and twentieth-century postbellum and postcolonial slave narratives, between texts by men and those by women. As comparatists, we must read this text not only against different cultural grains but across critical categories of analysis and value. We would reconfigure a traditional question such as "How might a modern Nigerian novel about slavery have been influenced by slave narratives?" as "How might a modern Nigerian novel about slavery affect a contemporary reading of slave narratives?" When the discourses of slavery that are constructed and reflected in nationalist mythologies of literary history are opened up to more diverse interpretations, the limitations of national readings stand out in stark relief. To set up an equation between sexual subjugation and slavery, as Emecheta has done in all of her novels, perforce changes "our" view of slavery. It also changes "our" view of patriarchy as a global as well as a particular phenomenon. Emecheta's poignant and sobering text militates against any temptation to totalize the discourse on slavery by rendering in assimilable terms the insidiousness of all systems of bondage and the recuperation, indeed the domestication, of history.